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Warning leads to safeguards for asbestos removal at Hanford

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By Annette Cary, Tri-City Herald

The Department of Energy and its regulators have agreed to restrict the use of heavy equipment to demolish buildings that still have asbestos out of concern for worker health.

The agreement, signed Monday, comes after the Environmental Protection Agency inspector general issued an early-warning report in December, saying that removal of asbestos in alternative ways at Hanford and elsewhere potentially threatened health and safety.

Hanford contractors have conducted no demolition of buildings with asbestos in alternative ways since then, in part because none had been scheduled, said DOE spokesman Geoff Tyree.

Hanford workers had been removing by hand all asbestos possible before demolishing buildings using heavy equipment, typically an excavator with shears.

That included panels of transite, or cement asbestos board, siding that were bolted onto buildings. The mid-century siding is common in Hanford buildings.

But when workers needed to be lifted seven stories high to remove 138-pound transite siding panels at Hanford's 384 Power House in 2008, workers instead used mechanical demolition, prying off panels as gently as possible and lowering them to the ground with an excavator equipped with a bucket and "thumb."

The practice spread to central Hanford buildings, even if work did not need to be done at high elevations, until mechanical demolition of about 26 buildings with asbestos had been completed by the end of 2011.

The transite siding is considered nonfriable because it doesn't easily crumble into a powder that can be breathed in. Breathing in fine fibers of asbestos can cause cancer and other lung diseases, sometimes decades after exposure, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

However, Hanford regulators EPA and the Washington State Department of Ecology now are concerned that mechanically removing siding could cause it to "become crumbled, pulverized or reduced to powder."

Last month, in response to worker concerns raised after the EPA inspector general's early warning, top Hanford and union officials sent a message to all Hanford employees saying tighter controls would be placed on areas that contained asbestos.

That includes siding or roofing material that could break or blow off buildings that have not been demolished and areas where asbestos-containing materials may remain on the ground after buildings have been demolished.

During the mechanical demolition of buildings with asbestos materials, monitoring was done and no readings indicated

workers were exposed above limits set by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, according to DOE. Additional sampling is being done at demolition sites.

Restrictions are being placed on mechanical demolition as a precaution, said Dennis Faulk, EPA Hanford program manager.

But if additional mechanical demolition is approved, there will need to be a compelling reason for it, he said.

"DOE and EPA will protect the work force, protect the environment and comply with laws," he said.

EPA in Washington, D.C., has issued a plan of corrections that includes communicating National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants and Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirements for demolition of asbestos-containing structures.

That includes notifying field offices that appropriate waivers must be issued for unapproved methods of asbestos removal and retracting approval for any work plans with unapproved methods of asbestos demolition.

EPA also recommends that any worker who might have been exposed to asbestos because of alternative demolition methods be notified. DOE is developing plans to contact former workers, most likely by letter.

It also has posted information at www.hanford.gov. Look for it in the rotating topics near the upper left corner.

"We'll be working with EPA and providing any information they request as they work through their corrective actions," Tyree said. "Our goal is to ensure our workers continue to be safe as they do environmental cleanup."

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DOE says asbestos levels at Hanford test OK

Published: May 9, 2012



Richard Dickin | rdickin@tricityherald.com Hanford workers in 2008 dismantle the 384 Power House, one of the largest buildings remaining at Hanford's 300 Area and the last one to come down in the north half of the area. The contractor is soaking the building's asbestos-covered panels with firefighting foam and then removing them.

Richard Dickin

By Annette Cary — Tri-City Herald

Sampling to check for asbestos has been completed at Hanford with none detected at levels believed to affect worker health, according to the Department of Energy.

"The data reviewed for this evaluation ... indicate there is little in the way of occupational asbestos exposure risk to the workers on the site due to the activities associated with demolition of facilities," said a report released Tuesday.

However, that does not mean concerns were unfounded, said a message sent to all Hanford employees Tuesday by Matt McCormick, manager of the DOE Hanford Richland Operations Office.

"We all have a right to raise concerns and to have those concerns addressed," he said in the message.

Multiple Hanford workers started asking questions in January about asbestos risks.

They were concerned about outdoor steam lines with asbestos-containing insulation that could be disturbed by the weather or nearby work. They also questioned whether buildings that had been demolished to ground-level might have left asbestos-containing material that could be broken into pieces by walking or driving through it.

In other cases, asbestos-materials in deteriorating buildings that have yet to be demolished could pose a risk, they said.

Part of the concern came from an Environmental Protection Agency inspector general report on whether Hanford contractors should be allowed to mechanically remove cement asbestos board, or transite, siding.

The transite siding is considered nonfriable because it doesn't easily crumble into a powder that can be breathed in. Breathing in fine fibers of asbestos can cause cancer and other lung diseases, sometimes decades after exposure, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease control and Prevention.

However, the EPA inspector general questioned whether there was a risk of the siding becoming crumbled, pulverized or reduced to powder when it is removed with an excavator equipped with a bucket and "thumb."

Several steps have been taken since the first of the year to ensure worker safety.

The Department of Energy, EPA and the Washington State Department of Ecology have agreed to restrict the use of heavy equipment to demolish buildings that still have asbestos, including those with transite siding.

DOE also had thousands of samples evaluated, and the report released Tuesday concluded there were no findings of concern.

A contractor team evaluated 277 samples from devices attached to workers' lapels during earlier demolition of 28 structures or groups of structures that still had asbestos.

It found none of them to contain asbestos fibers above the limit established by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The team also evaluated 2,873 samples collected during demolition activities. None had asbestos in excess of EPA limits, according to the new report.

Additional samples were collected to make sure that asbestos had not spread, including by vehicles from demolition sites, and the water supply was tested.

Earlier this year, a program was launched to protect worker safety by picking up any fragments of materials suspected of containing asbestos and adding covers, including soil, to certain areas of concern.

"A team made up of DOE, Hanford Atomic Metal Trades Council (HAMTC) safety representatives, contractors and concerned employees have been working on several corrective actions, and most of those actions have been completed," McCormick said in his message to staff.

DOE also has posted more information for current and past employees at www.hanford.gov. Look on the rotating display of subjects near the top of the page.

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